

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

3527
Bi-956
March, 1928

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BUREAU OF BIOLOGICAL SURVEY

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BEGINNERS IN FUR FARMING

By Frank G. Ashbrook
In charge Division of Fur Resources

The following outline of information on the general subject of fur-farming has been prepared to assist in replying to correspondents who desire more or less general information on how to make a start in fur farming, areas suitable for fur farming, where to obtain breeding stock, what it takes to make a good fur farmer, species suitable for propagation, and references to publications of the Department of Agriculture on specific phases of the subject. Any of the publications mentioned in the following paragraphs can be had free as long as the supply lasts on request addressed to the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

SOME POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS

Many who contemplate entering a new industry look only to its great possibilities and profits, closing their eyes, consciously or unconsciously, to the pit-falls and discouragements that may exist. The fact that fur-animal production is practically a new industry makes it extremely easy to deceive the novice. Alluring articles in the public press on fur farming, under such titles as "Muskrats - Acres of Diamonds," or "Fox-Farming - An Inevitable Gold Mine," or the propaganda distributed by dishonest dealers in fur-animal breeding stock, lead many to believe that a fortune awaits them in this industry. Many who inquire about fur-farming have the notion that they can build pens or fence in a rugged piece of land, turn loose some fur-bearers, feed them occasionally, and then once a year collect a profit from the pelts that they think will be produced. Persons with no experience in fur farming would do well to obtain employment on a fur farm and thus familiarize themselves with the principles involved before engaging in the business for themselves.

Successful breeders of fur animals either must possess or else must acquire a clear conception of the important factors involved in breeding. They are interested in breed improvement and concentrate their efforts mainly on increasing prolificacy and quality in their breeding stock. Never do they lose sight of the fact that fur animals are bred and raised primarily for the fur produced, and that the sale of breeding stock is a secondary consideration.

PROSPECTIVE INVESTORS

Big returns are easily predicted or promised to prospective investors, on an abnormally high rate of dividends or on large pelt profits. Heavy risks usually accompany such lures. Too often they are the chief talking points of financial charlatans. Promoters know that the names and endorsements of successful men carry weight, and often use these without authorization. An example is the statement sometimes heard to the effect that the United States Department of Agriculture endorses fur farming or certain individuals or companies engaged in fur farming. The prudent investor, however, will look beyond names and endorsements and investigate the merits of all propositions or contemplated transactions.

The promoter who tries to impress the prospective investor by tabulating the fabulous returns supposed to have been realized in the early stages of fur farming from investment in a pair of foxes unwittingly admits that his offering can not stand on its own feet. Such figures fire the imagination but they are generally deceptive. They are not a true index to the profits to be expected from any new enterprise in which the small investor is urged to put his money.

Irresponsible sellers of silver foxes often "guarantee" that certain profits will be made or dividends paid, or even that they will buy back or resell when the purchaser wants his money. Such guarantees never can afford protection unless their makers have financial backing. Promises of this nature are made to establish confidence and lull suspicion. They should indicate to the prospective purchaser a special need to investigate not only the securities offered but also the responsibility of the proposed guarantor.

HOW TO MAKE A START

It is not wise to begin fur farming with a large number of animals. Many who have done so or who have expanded too rapidly have failed. The better method is to start with a few pairs of animals and gradually increase the number as one's knowledge of care and management enlarges. Troubles and obstacles are bound to arise, and remedies for the present can be learned only through experience. Quality, not quantity, is the factor that counts in breeding fur animals.

Breeding stock should be obtained in fall, in order that the animals may become thoroughly accustomed to their new surroundings before the breeding season. The weather is sufficiently cold by the end of September in fur-farming areas to permit the shipment of animals with safety.

AREAS SUITABLE FOR FUR FARMING

The natural habitat of most of the fur animals of North America covers the greater part of the continent from the central United States northward into Alaska and Canada, including the border of the treeless tundras. Among fur buyers it is well known that the pelts produced in northern localities

are the more valuable, and while their experience teaches that certain areas are not too far south to yield valuable furs, their conclusions are only general. The average person can not always judge whether his own locality is suitable, especially if the wild fur animals have been exterminated there. It is necessary, therefore, to ascertain definitely the areas withing which fur animals are known to produce superior fur.

WHERE TO OBTAIN BREEDING STOCK

State game commissions in many instances have records of the fur farmers in their respective States and frequently can supply the names and addresses of those having surplus stock. The kinds of animals raised and the price of breeding stock can then be obtained from the breeders themselves. The Federal Department of Agriculture raises fur animals for experimental purposes only and has none for sale. It does not issue permits to persons who contemplate engaging in fur farming. This matter also is handled by State authorities. It is contrary to the policy of the department to vouch for the integrity or financial standing of any individual or company engaged in fur farming, and under no condition will it pass judgment on any investment proposition in the industry.

QUALIFICATIONS OF A GOOD FUR-FARMER

Many of the failures that have occurred in fur-farming may be attributed directly to negligence on the part of the caretaker. Fur animals will not do well under shiftless management, and a fur-farmer who has no interest in the welfare of his animals need not expect success. The farmer should handle his breeding animals in a manner to insure the highest percentage of increase and when necessary should be willing to spend part or all of his time looking after their welfare. One who walks through the ranch without the keen perception to detect a sick animal is by no means the proper kind of caretaker, and one who sees a sick animal but does not look after its needs at once is even worse. A rancher who likes to be away from the farm frequently has not the welfare of the business at heart, and a caretaker who is not disturbed over the loss of animals and is otherwise not thrifty should no longer have charge of a ranch. One who is not careful to avoid feeding moldy or spoiled feed of any kind does not have the instincts of a fur-farmer. He must not be misled by statements that fur animals need little or no water, but must furnish them pure, fresh, water every day, for fur animals must be supplied with water just the same as other animals, unless snow is on the ground, when they can get their water from it.

A good faithful rancher looks to every detail of his work and has his mind and heart with his animals at all times. He leaves nothing undone to promote the health and welfare of each individual. He likes to discuss problems with others who are interested in the same work and to learn of improved methods of handling and management. The readiness with which his animals accommodate themselves to a life of captivity depends greatly on his attitude toward them.

SPECIES SUITABLE FOR PROPAGATION

The success attained in raising foxes in captivity naturally leads one to conclude that other species also may eventually be produced profitably in pens. The pelts of fishers, martens, minks, otters, and raccoons generally command high prices. This is due to the fact that these skins are comparatively scarce and are invariably fine specimens, giving lasting wear and having a soft, silky, and beautiful appearance. The scarcity of a fur, the world demand, and the prevailing fashion are factors that naturally influence the market value. Foxes, fishers, martens, minks, otters, skunks, raccoons, opossums, beavers, muskrats, rabbits, and others have been kept in captivity and studied to determine the feasibility of producing fur profitably. Reference to further information published by the department on the various species is made in parenthesis at the end of each of the following sections.

FOXES

The great interest in fox farming is to be ascribed in large measure to the enormous profits derived from the sale of pelts and breeding stock. Probably no other livestock enterprise pays larger returns, although erroneous statements regarding this industry have misled the public as to its real status. Intelligently managed, the production of silver foxes has proved profitable, and the demand continues for good breeding stock and pelts of quality. A silver-fox pelt of high quality, taken in the wild, has always been and still is very rare. To-day practically all the silver-fox pelts sold on the raw-fur market are from ranch-raised foxes. (See also U. S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 1151-D, "Silver-Fox Farming.")

FISHERS

The raising of fishers in captivity has not expanded to any great extent since 1912, when there were only two fisher farms on the North American Continent. This lack of development can be attributed to the difficulty in trapping good breeding stock without injury and to the apparent disinclination of the animals to breed and produce young in captivity. Experiments show that the fisher is hardy and may be kept successfully in wire inclosures. (See also Biological Survey Leaflet Bi-103, "Hints on the Care of Martens and Fishers.")

MARTENS

Experiments have been made in raising martens in captivity, but few persons have been successful in the undertaking because of the difficulty in getting the animals to breed in captivity and produce young. The equipment, feed, and labor are not excessive in caring for the animals, however, and if they can be produced in sufficiently large numbers there should be a ready market for the pelts. (See also Biological Survey Leaflet Bi-103, "Hints on the Care of Martens and Fishers.")

MINKS

Minks are not difficult to raise in captivity, for when fed and handled properly they breed and produce young regularly. They are very prolific and produce six, seven, and eight to the litter. The cost of equipment, feed, and

labor amounts to so much, however, that it is a problem to raise these animals on a sufficiently large scale to make the production of fur profitable. The money made in raising minks has thus far been more through the sale of breeding stocks than of pelts. (See also U. S. Department of Agriculture Leaflet No. 8-L, "Mink Raising.")

OTTERS

Dependable experiments have never been fully carried out in feeding, breeding, and handling otters in captivity, and the problem of whether they can be raised on a commercial scale is still to be solved. A generation ago fur producers seemed very optimistic on the future of otter ranching, but even those animals that have been kept in confinement in a number of zoological parks for exhibition purposes in most cases have never produced young. Under exhibition conditions otters apparently do not have sufficient seclusion for breeding and are too much disturbed by the presence of visitors. In one or two instances where young were born they did not live to maturity. Perhaps under favorable surroundings otters can be raised profitably, but actual experiments must be conducted for some years before their production in captivity can be recommended definitely as a promising industry. (See also Biological Survey Leaflet Bi-152, "Hints on the Care of Otters.")

SKUNKS

Whenever high prices prevail for skunk fur it leads to renewed interest in raising skunks, and at present a number of persons are endeavoring to produce this fur profitably on farms. A heavy foreign demand for black skunk fur about 1885 and 1886 led to close trapping and resulted in a scarcity, and the feasibility of developing a strain of black skunks by selective breeding was then under consideration. Many experiments in skunk farming were undertaken, but falling prices and other hindrances soon caused many breeders to abandon their attempts, although a number of companies had made heavy investments in lands and equipment. The propagation of skunks for their fur has been investigated carefully, and it is found that at the present market prices more money must be spent in feed and labor than can be realized from the sale of pelts. (See also U.S. Department of Agriculture Farmers' Bulletin No. 587-F, "Economic Value of North American Skunks.")

RACCOONS

The demand for live raccoons for both fur-farming and restocking purposes has encouraged a great many persons to raise these animals in captivity. A number of game commissions are raising raccoons on farms to restock depleted areas within their States. In some States large numbers of the animals are imported annually to furnish sport for hunters. These and related developments have given impetus to raccoon farming, an industry that should be promising if the animals can be produced economically in captivity. (See also Biological Survey Leaflet Bi-216, "Hints on the Care of Raccoons.")

OPOSSUMS

The fur of the opossum is not particularly handsome or durable and for this reason has not brought high prices in recent years. It is not profitable to produce opossums on farms, for they require as much food, equipment, and attention as some of the other fur species, and the pelt is sold for much less. (See also Biological Survey Leaflet Bi-180, "Hints on the Care of Opossums.")

BEAVERS

Raising beavers in pens under complete control is still in the experimental stage, and it has yet to be determined whether it will prove profitable. In certain sections of the country, to prevent beavers from escaping or doing damage to neighboring property, it may be necessary to fence part or all of the land at considerable expense, and this raises a serious operating problem. Furthermore, if beavers are removed from their natural habitat and placed in breeding pens and all their food has to be hauled to them, this involves extra expense. In figuring possible profits it is to be remembered also that beavers are not so prolific as other fur animals and it may take five to eight years for a small colony to increase sufficiently to yield any return on the investment, and that during these years the land may not even pay the taxes.

Restocking suitable areas with beavers and giving them proper protection seems to be the most practicable method of producing beaver fur in commercial quantity. Beavers should not be introduced uncontrolled into places where their activities may menace irrigation or power ditches or important highway or railroad grades. Only such areas as are determined in advance to be suitable should be stocked, and they should contain an ample supply of suitable food and permanent water.

If it is desired to learn something of the life habits of beavers and the possibilities of success in rearing them, several may be placed in a natural pond, lake, or creek that can be fenced. Such a project would have to be enlarged considerably, however, to make the production of beaver fur profitable. It may be unwise to start beaver farming on a large scale, but this will have to be accomplished eventually if the industry is to become an important branch of fur-farming. (See also U. S. Department of Agriculture Technical Bulletin No. 21-T, "Beaver Habits and Experiments in Beaver Culture.")

MUSKRATS

Ability to maintain itself in large numbers in the face of constantly changing conditions makes the muskrat potentially an economic asset. Although in some localities it is injurious to cultivated crops, it is for the most part a denizen of places unsuited to agriculture. Usually, however, acre for acre marsh areas devoted to muskrats will yield as much revenue from the fur as will the best neighboring arable land from crops, and in some cases even more. One marsh area in Maryland, for example, was purchased in 1916 for

\$5,000, and sold in 1923 for \$19,800. Under present conditions, the areas where the muskrat exists are capable of supporting larger numbers than are ordinarily produced there.

Musk rats are not raised under conditions similar to those needed by domestic animals. The marsh itself produces the necessary food, and there the muskrats feed and breed. When the trapping season comes around, the owner traps, or, if he does not care to do even this, he employs professional trappers. When the season is over, he returns to his attitude of "watchful waiting" while his muskrats take care of themselves and by their prolificacy produce enough young to make the next trapping season profitable.

This has been going on for generations where muskrats are found in abundance, particularly in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Louisiana, where practically all the muskrat marshland is privately owned. In view of the increasing popularity of muskrat fur, the animals should receive their full share of attention in any agricultural plan of land utilization. (See also U. S. Department of Agriculture Farmers' Bulletin No. 869-F, "The Muskrat as a Fur Bearer with Notes on Its Use as Food.")

RABBITS

Rabbits have been bred for food and fur in this country for many years, and during this time the meat of both wild and domestic rabbits has had a place on the American table and the pelts have been a staple in the fur trade. The production of domestic rabbits has developed during the past few years into an industry that promises to become important throughout the whole country. (See also U. S. Department of Agriculture Leaflets No. 4-L, "Raising Domestic Rabbits," and No. 15-L, "Rabbit-House Construction," and Farmers' Bulletin No. 1519-F, "Rabbit Skins for Fur.")

